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HUMAN RIGHTS IN EAST TIMOR: A RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNITED STATES

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In December 1989, my wife Brenda and I visited East Timor. We were were struck by the climate of fear and the denial of human rights. Since our trip, many others have visited there and some will be speaking to you today. Therefore, rather than repeating the details of our journey, I would like to reflect on the implications of the present situation and to comment on the role of the United States in this sad affair.

First, a few words about my own background. As a United States Marine infantry officer, I took part in heavy fighting on Guadalcanal. I have also visited Nicaragua, South Africa, Vietnam during the war, and Soviet Russia. I am no stranger to heavily militarized situations. However, I was shocked by what we encountered in East Timor. It was as bad as anything I have encountered with respect to the suppression of human rights. Quite apart from the bloody history of the invasion, apart from the massacre of 150,000 to 200,000 people in the past, the present conditions and reported suppressions are intolerable. The people of East Timor feel they are the subjects of systematic genocide and of the destruction of their culture as a people. They feel like

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prisoners on their own native soil.

Many recent reports of conditions have come through. The Sunday Observer of London published an extensive article on April 7, 1991 based on a recent visit to East Timor by the veteran journalist Hugh O'Shaughnessy. Copies of this piece are available. However, he made one comment not included in the article. He said that in his twenty-five years as a journalist travelling throughout Latin America, he never witnessed a situation as militarized as the one he saw in East Timor. In view of the recent history of Latin America, this is a devastating statement. To speak of slight improvements over past years misses the point, namely that after fifteen years of occupation, an entire population is still occupied by the military is still cruelly being denied basic human rights and the right of self-determination.

What has been the reaction of the United States? First of all, Secretary Kissinger and President Ford left Jakarta the day before the invasion. The transcript of a memorandum published in recent months in the Nation indicates that Kissinger encouraged the invasion. The words of then Rep. Donald Fraser, who held hearings on the Timor situation in the late seventies, appropriate:

> "...There is a degree of complicity here by the United States that I really find to be quite disturbing. Even if one sets that aside, to write off 600,000 people, because we are friends with the country which forcibly annexed them, does real violence to any profession of adherence to the principle of human rights."

Not only did we encourage the invasion, but State Department testimony makes it clear that roughly ninety percent of the arms used were from the United States.

Since then, substantial numbers of Congresspersons have registered their concern. Just last year, under the leadership of Rep. Tony Hall, a majority of representatives petitioned the President and the State Department on East Timor's behalf. Despite this, no administration since that of President Ford has vigorously urged Indonesia Indonesia to allow East Timor a real referendum on self-determination. We continue to supply arms to Jakarta. Within the past two years, Vice President Quayle paid a friendly visit to President Suharto. We recognize Indonesia's occupation, DE FACTO but not DE JURE.

President Bush proclaimed a new world order as the principle which guided our expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. The size of the Kuwaiti population is on the same scale as that of East Timor. Furthermore, although the occupation of Kuwait was brutal, it was nowhere nearly as brutal or as bloody as that of East Timor. And we must never forget that the East Timorese fought heroically on our side against the Japanese in World War II...80,000 Timorese gave their lives.

Even if we set aside the issue of self-determination, there are disturbing signs that the United States is trying to downplay the human rights crisis in East Timor. In recent weeks a

State Department official phoned me to report on a recent visit there by a staffperson of our embassy in Jakarta. The burden of the conversation was that things were tranquil now and that there was no word of human rights problems. Last Fall's arrestees were being brought to trial. He spoke of the problem of youth unemployment and that the hearts and minds of the people had not been won over, yet things were better, quieter.

On the other hand, last week I received a long letter from a Timorese in Portugal giving the names of forty-odd young people who had been falsely arrested, tortured, or made to disappear as recently as December. An incident the writer recounted was that one of those arrested was made to eat his own hair: when he threw up, his jailers knocked out his teeth. The victim is now said to be in a hospital with a mental breakdown.

What additional reports are being heard from East Timor? One highly reliable source states that recent East Timorese detainees have had their faces cut with razor blades by people under the control of Indonesian authorities. A similar report appeared in the April 7 Sunday Observer article. There have been other such accounts. It is difficult to believe that the United States government could consider a situation in which such actions take place as being even remotely acceptable.

The point is that there are waves of intensity in the persecution of alleged dissidents, but the oppression continues.

For the most part, visitors from our embassy are chaperoned by local officials, which makes it next to impossible to get a true picture of what is going on.

One problem with obtaining a complete picture of the situation is that because of the censorship and fear, it takes a long while for information to be verified.

I am deeply impressed by the courage of the young people who continue to demonstrate in various ways despite the risk, despite the torturing and even death of their colleagues. My fear is that the Indonesian authorities will crack down on them in the equivalent of a Tianamen Square massacre, or at the very least will intensify the current level of persecution.

Congress and the parliaments of other nations should be aware of such threats, and take what measures they can to prevent them. However, the underlying and intractable issue is that of self-determination. There will never be peace, justice and freedom until the people are allowed to determine their own destiny.

I am glad that the United States raises objections to human rights violations in East Timor, as Ambassador John Monjo did a year ago during his visit there, but this is not nearly enough. It is time that the United States, Japan and other

concerned nations who have economic investments in Indonesia and who have political influence there, coordinated their efforts at the highest level to press Indonesia toward a just solution.

It is time that Australia was willing to set aside the lure of oil implicit in the Timor Gap treaty and to fulfill her obligation toward the rightful owners of the resources of the Timor Sea. For apart from the clear moral and humanitarian issues involved, we all stand to benefit from the development of East Timor, which can only come as a handmaiden of peace.